

BLIZZARD OF '49, WYOMING PUBLIC TELEVISION ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Speaker 1: We're recording.

Speaker 2: Okay, Francis just start out and give me your name first.

Francis: My name is Francis [Chalker 00:00:09].

Speaker 2: Tell me about where you were living before the blizzard struck and then we can get into the blizzard.

Francis: We lived 4 miles west and about 2 miles south of Manville.

Speaker 2: Tell me about your living quarters.

Francis: We had only been married about 5 and a half months. We moved into this old house, it was about 3 rooms, so we just moved into the 1 big room. We had wood and some hay bails in the one room, and we had dog and we had dog food.

Speaker 2: So pretty Spartan living there as newly weds?

Francis: Yes.

Speaker 2: Then January 1st was New Year's Day and I don't know if you recall what you did that New Year's but January 2nd is when it hit, right?

Francis: Yes. We hadn't gone anywhere on January 1st because we were supposed to be up at [Orn 00:01:20] celebrating the brother-in-law's birthday. We had gotten up that morning to feed the cattle and it was cloudy, and it just started lightning and thundering. Then it started snowing while we were out feeding the cattle. That was pretty spooky. Anyway, we decided then and there that we weren't going. The longer we were out there the worse it got so we took the cattle back to the [corral 00:01:56].

Speaker 2: [00:02:00] It was thundering and lightning and snowing at the same time?

Francis: Yes.

Speaker 2: That must've been really scary.

Francis: It was, and I was raised on a ranch all my life so that was scary. Anyway, the longer the day went, the worse it got. It just snowed and blowed and we went in

the house, and of course the old windows and stuff, it whistled threw the windows. It just was spooky.

Speaker 2: Did you get accumulation of snow in your house?

Francis: I do not remember any in our house but I don't know how.

Speaker 2: Do you remember having problems with static electricity like Jimmy was talking about?

Francis: No, I don't. I don't remember that. I know there was static, we had an old radio, a battery radio and we tried to get the weather on it. Of course, you couldn't and there was a lot of static but that was different.

Speaker 2: You had no phone?

Francis: Oh no, you didn't have no phone. No electricity, just coal-oil lamps. We just had an oil burner and every time it started it's go boom. Anyway, we run out of oil right away and we had a dog and she had pups behind the oil burner and of course, they died. Then we had a little cook stove, it wasn't the big, old comforter stoves and stuff they had, it was just a little one. We did have wood cut in this other room, so we kept it going. It would get so hot, I mean it warped the top but you didn't get warm. Your feet were cold, you wore all the clothes you could put on.[00:04:00] When you sat around we usually, for our wedding present we had about 5 wool blankets given to us and a comforter, we'd put them around us to try and keep warm.

My husband would go out probably about every 2 hours to check the cows and we did not at the time have a rope or anything, so we headed toward the windmill and then toward the barn. There was a fence about halfway through that we would follow if you'd get there. Anyway, the longer the cows were there they'd stomp and they'd get up higher and higher. I'd go out with him a lot of the time and we would knock the icicles off of their eyes and their mouth every time because they'd get too hard and too long. One of them was our milk cow and we tried to milk to her but of course, no feed, no water she didn't give any milk so we didn't try after the first time.

Speaker 2: You said, "No feed and no water" at what point were you able to start feeding your cattle again?

Francis: When it was over. When it was over, [Edwin's dad 00:05:24] clobbered up a sled and came over and moved us out. We put the chickens in a ... Well, we finally got down to the chickens, this was quite a while after it was over but we put the chickens in gunny sacks. He had brought one bail of hay and we coaxed the cows

that way. But anyhow, going out we tried putting boxes over our face but that didn't [00:06:00] work because the snow whirled up under the box and that was worse yet. It was so cold it just would take your breath away.

We had a lean-to again, an open shed, next to the cow barn. We tried putting them in there and we cut blocks of snow to block them in and anyhow, that didn't work because it filled in around them. You couldn't cover up all the holes so we had to get them out of there again. When it was over, why the cows were level with the top of the barn roof. We couldn't have held them another day.

Speaker 2: They had to come down the snow bank then to ...

Francis: Yeah. The wind would blow the snow higher than the window. I'd hang a lantern in there in case he got close or got lost, Edwin. That snow bank would be down and then it'd be up in a different direction so you never knew by the snow banks. You couldn't go by them because they would change all the time.

Speaker 2: It just kept changing on you?

Francis: Yes.

Speaker 2: That would make for getting lost a lot easier.

Francis: Yes, but we both made it back every time. I did go out with Edwin a lot.

Speaker 2: You said your dad came over to move you over to his place during the blizzard?

Francis: No, this was way after. That was my husband's dad, his folks lived by the highway on the north side. They had the sheep and like Carmen said there was very few we saved but you could see where there'd be an air hole up through they'd breath through [00:08:00]. After a while they'd just ... it lasted too long. I don't think we saved very many sheep.

Speaker 2: How many sheep are we talking about roughly?

Francis: There was probably a hundred head.

Speaker 2: They were encased in a snow cave that they melted with their warm breaths?

Francis: Yes, but they'd drift of course.

Speaker 2: I've heard stories about the sheep that their legs would freeze up and they'd break their legs when they tried to walk.

Francis: Yeah, that was pretty bad.

We had a hog and the milk cow calf and they were next to where we had the milk barn and the open shed and the chicken house, or the little lean-to for them. We had oyster shell on a shell there to feed the chickens. Anyway, they ate that, the hog and the calf, and when we did get them out of there, the hog was just like a [razorback 00:09:15]. He was skinny as I'll get out, but the calf lived. We did put grain down the ... whatever you call the hole in the chicken house.

Speaker 2: I think you called it the stink hole.

Francis: Yeah, the stink hole (laughs). Anyhow, when we got to them finally there were lots of frozen eggs but the chickens were alive.

Speaker 2: What did you say? You fed the calves, I mean the pig and the calf ate, shells?

Francis: It was oyster shell which you feed chickens to make their shells, the egg shells hard.

Speaker 2: I see.

Francis: I don't know how they could eat that [00:10:00] but they did.

Speaker 2: The calf ate it too?

Francis: Yeah, I guess. They both lived anyway.

Speaker 2: The chickens made it but the eggs didn't?

Francis: Nope.

Speaker 2: What do you do with the frozen egg? Throw them out I guess?

Francis: Throw them out (laughs).

I'll never forget when the train finally did come through of course it was the old coal fed, and that noise they made. That was awesome to hear that finally but that was a long time after.

Speaker 2: After hearing nothing but the howling winds.

Francis: Yes, and you never get over that fear completely and I hate wind to this day. Especially when it blows hard because it allows reminds you of that.

Speaker 2: Did you make it into [Lusk 00:11:01] at all after the blizzard?

Francis: Oh no. We got to Manville, finally.

Speaker 2: What kind of shape was Manville in? Do you recall?

Francis: Not too good of shape, I know we got to the grocery store. There was an older feller there named Mr. Blankenship and everybody charged their groceries to him. He did have a big supply of groceries.

Speaker 2: He never ran out of groceries for folks then?

Francis: As far as I know, no.

Speaker 2: That was fortunate because weren't the groceries supplied to this area by trains?

Francis: Yes. Well, I never thought of that. I don't know, were some of them brought by trucks?[crosstalk 00:11:45]

Speaker 2: Everything was shut down though so he must've had a really good supply laid in.

Francis: He did, he was good about that. [00:12:00]

I know we were one of the first ones that paid off the bill, everybody charged. I had a third daughter then and she was just little. He bought her a tricycle for us paying off the bill. That wen through the rest of my kids and my oldest son's kids. That was a good tricycle.

Speaker 2: Wow, kind of a souvenir of the store.

Francis: Right.

Speaker 2: You've been around this area for a long time and you've been through a lot of winter storms since the Blizzard of 49. Do any of them stack up?

Francis: In 50, the year after that, we got 30 inches of snow on the level and no wind. That was a different story too.

Speaker 2: But nothing quite like that?

Francis: No, not like that. Until this one. Well, we had the other day, the second of June. That's a different story.

Speaker 2: Yes, indeed. Were you ever really afraid during the storm that you weren't going to make it?

Francis: I don't remember being afraid that we weren't going to make it. I think I was afraid Edwin wouldn't make it back or something. I think that was another reason I went out with him a lot. I was born and raised in the country and he wasn't always.

Speaker 2: Okay. Anything else [00:14:00] that you can think of? I'm looking at my notes from last time and you really stuck to your story. So it must be true (laughs).

Francis: Yeah (laughs). It just seemed like it lasted forever but it finally quit.

Speaker 2: You don't want to experience that one again?

Francis: No.

Speaker 2: All right. I'm looking over this. Oh, you talked about washing your floor.

Francis: Oh yes. After it was over, here came Edwin's dad and his older brother. I thought, "Oh my gosh, I've to scrub my floor." Of course, I had the warming oven on the stove and I put some water in a bucket and a mop in it. I stuck it down to mop the floor and the mop froze to the floor. That ended that.

Speaker 2: Let them come over with a dirty floor.

Francis: Yup (laughs). I don't think they noticed but ...

Speaker 2: I think that's it. If you can't think of anything else, I don't have anything else here.

Francis: I can't remember cooking or anything like that but must've had something on the stove all the time, I don't know.

Speaker 2: Thanks so much, Francis.

Francis: You're welcome.

Speaker 2: Appreciate it.

Speaker 1: Cut.